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ABSTRACT

Existing curricula on prevention of sexual exploitation for non-mentally handicapped children are not appropriate for the mentally retarded. Curricula specifically designed for special needs students include the "Special Education Curriculum on Sexual Exploitation" for mildly handicapped students and "Self-Protection for the Handicapped" for moderately/severely mentally handicapped students. To implement the curricula in a school district requires that administrator approval be acquired, that teachers receive inservice training, and that parents preview curriculum materials and air their concerns. Actual teaching of sexual abuse prevention curriculum can then take place. Instruction should occur in a group rather than in an individualized format, in 30- to 45-minute sessions each day for 24 weeks, using materials adapted to meet the needs of the particular students. It is important that concepts and skills be mastered before discussion of exceptions occurs. The efficacy of the curricula was evaluated by placing trained and untrained students in potentially exploitative simulations. The trained students performed significantly better than untrained students, indicating that classroom training generalized to perceived realistic situations. (JDD)

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Teaching the Mentally Handicapped to Avoid Sexual Exploitation

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Abstract

This article documents the need for a special curricula designed to teach the mentally handicapped self-protection skills to avoid sexual exploitation. In response to this pressing need, a unique and effective curricular approach to this dilemma is offered and detailed.

Teaching the Mentally Handicapped to
Avoid Sexual Exploitation

Much public attention has recently been focused upon the problem of child sexual abuse. In response to this timely outcry, curricula have been developed to teach students to identify and protect themselves from sexual abuse. Examples of such material include Red Flag, Green Flag People (Williams, 1980) and The Touching Contiunuum (Harms and James, 1982).

These curricula however, are not designed, nor are they appropriate, for mentally handicapped individuals. Clearly the need exists for such programs for the mentally handicapped since data compiled by the Seattle Rape Relief (1979 a) indicated that there may be as many as 500 cases of sexual exploitation of handicapped individuals in the greater Seattle area alone. Moreover, it can be argued that handicapped individuals may be more vulnerable than their non-handicapped peers in terms of their lack of recognition and prevention skills in dealing with sexual exploitation.

There are many reasons why existing curricula for non-mentally handicapped children are not appropriate for the mentally handicapped. First of all, the vocabulary used may be too intellectually complex for

the mentally handicapped. It can be argued that materials designed for primary grade children could be used with the mentally handicapped to minimize the problem of complex vocabulary. However, this solution fails to account for the fact that mentally handicapped persons have similar sexual development and sexual needs of non-handicapped individuals (see Hall, 1974; Renshaw, 1985). Therefore, adolescent and young adult mentally handicapped individuals would need information beyond that presented to primary grade children (e.g., how to handle themselves in dating situations). Secondly, some sexual abuse prevention curricula for non-mentally handicapped children discuss feelings the child experiences when touched in appropriate and inappropriate ways. It is very difficult for many mentally handicapped persons to protect themselves in a situation and identify the feelings elicited and then express these feelings to others. Additionally, there is often insufficient repetition of concepts to insure mastery by mentally handicapped students.

A further problem in these curricula with mentally

handicapped is that there may be certain knowledge which is assumed before instruction begins. For example, it may be of critical importance to discriminate between a friend and a stranger or between public and private body parts. Existing evidence indicates that the mentally handicapped lack such knowledge (Fisher, 1982 a).

Finally, in the teaching of self-protection concepts to avoid sexual abuse to mentally handicapped students, real-life visual aids must be used for acquired skills to be generalizable to potential real-life situations (Money, 1973). These ingredients may be lacking in programs for non-mentally handicapped students. These curricula often do not depict situations in which sexual abuse of the mentally handicapped would be likely to occur such as group homes, residential facilities, special olympics activities, and sheltered workshops.

Special Education Curriculum on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation[1]

For all the aformentioned reasons, teaching

mentally handicapped students to avoid sexual exploitation is best accomplished through curricula specifically designed for them. Fortunately, such curricula do exist. The Developmental Disabilities project of Seattle Rape Relief developed Special Education Curriculum on Sexual Exploitation (Seattle Rape Relief, 1979 b).

This curriculum consist of two levels, Level I and Level II. The former is applicable to elementary age, mildly mentally handicapped students while Level II is appropriate for mentally handicapped secondary age students. This curriculum has also been used with other handicapped populations. An adaptation of this curriculum, Self-Protection for the Handicapped (Fisher, 1982 b), has been devised for moderately and severely mentally handicapped students.

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[1]The authors derive no financial benefit from the sale of this curriculum.

The mission of these curricula is to teach students the following skills:

1. Discriminate among friends, family and strangers.
2. Take precautionary measures with strangers.
3. Identify private body parts.
4. Discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate advances.
5. Asserting themselves when inappropriately touched.
6. Resist giving personal information to strangers.
7. Protect themselves from exploitation when traveling, in social situations and at home.
8. Resist sexual exploitation from authority figures and as an exchange for favors, gifts and kindnesses.
9. Report incidences of sexual exploitation.

These lessons contain simplified language with a great deal of emphases of repetition. Furthermore, audio-visual materials are used depicting mentally handicapped individuals in realistic settings.

Administrative Initiation

Unfortunately, while these materials are existant, it is not possible for a teacher, in most school

districts, to simply obtain the curriculum and begin instruction. Normally, the chief administrator of special education programs must be contacted regarding the initiation of such a program. It might be helpful in such a contact to mention the data from Seattle Rape Relief on the frequency of sexual abuse of the handicapped and any instances of sexual abuse in the schools fo the particular district.

Administrators may be concerned with parent reaction to the use of these curricula. Therefore, it might be advisable to relay the results of a survey by Fischer and Krazicek (1974) which found that the greatest concern of parents of the mentally handicapped was the possible sexual exploitation of their children. Parents who want such training for their children can contact the special education administrator.

Inservice Training

After administrative approval, teachers who will be

using sexual abuse prevention curriculum need inservice training. Training sessions conducted have taken 15-18 hours and include discussion of positive sexuality and the handicapped, the problem of sexual exploitation of the handicapped, identification and interviewing potential victims, reporting sexual abuse, and practice teaching of curricula. Local rape relief agency personnel may be helpful in finding qualified persons to conduct this inservice training.

Before actual instruction begins, it is essential to hold a meeting of parents of students who will receive instruction in order to preview curriculum materials and air their questions and concerns. A portion of the inservice training described above is devoted to dealing with difficult questions parents might ask. Although teachers are often concerned with parent reaction to introduction of prevention of sexual abuse training, over two years of training more than 100 students, we had only one parent refuse to have their child participate. Our experience has been that parents of the mentally handicapped are very interested in their

children acquiring self-protection skills.

Delivery of the Program

Actual teaching of sexual abuse prevention curriculum differs from traditional special education instruction. The following suggestions for teaching are based on our experience over two years developing and teaching the Self-Protection for the Handicapped curriculum. First of all, instruction occurs in a group rather than in an individualized format. This type of instruction has been found to be effective since it appeared to the students to be more like a non-handicapped classroom, opportunities for interaction were available, and students were able to learn from the successes and failures of their peers. We also found it best to provide instruction every day for 30-45 minutes. At this rate, the entire curriculum took 24 weeks to teach. This was preferable to other instructional modalities since, too much time can be spent on reviewing concepts. It is also necessary to adapt

materials to meet the needs of the students. For example, there are many role plays in the program curricula. Some of these role plays involved the bus since many students traveled this way to work settings or social activities. Bus travel may not be available in some communities. Therefore, the method of travel in the role play could be changed. Also, since the activities curricula are sequenced so that skills and concepts are cumulative it may be necessary to repeat lessons or units. This was particulary evident for younger and more handicapped students. Finally, it is essential that the concepts and skills presented are mastered before discussion of exceptions occur. Frequently, when teaching concepts such as touching of private body parts, teachers ask whether they should tell the students that it is appropriate for medical persons to touch these areas. Our response is that the students should first learn that it is inappropriate for anyone to touch private body areas when they do not want them to. After this is learned, exceptions for medical reasons can be discussed. Early discussion of

exceptions to rules appears to confuse students.

Efficacy of the Program

Pre and post-tests were developed for all units to assess student mastery of skills. The effectiveness of the Self-Protection of the Handicapped curriculum was systematically studied by placing trained and untrained students in potentially exploitive simulations in which they were asked for personal information, to take candy, and visit the car of someone they did not know. These situations were quite real to the students.

The trained students performed significantly better than the untrained students indicating that classroom training generalized to perceived realistic situations. These data along with other more empirically vigorous results of the Self-Protection of the Handicapped project are reported elsewhere (Fisher and Field, 1985).

Conclusion

With the increasing emphasis on independent and

semi-independent living for the mentally handicapped, it is essential that these individuals learn to protect themselves from sexual exploitation. We have attempted to show how curricula developed for non-mentally handicapped children are inappropriate for mentally handicapped students and how existing curricula for the mentally handicapped can be adopted and effectively taught in school districts. Those involved in special education like to refer to "functional" skills (Frankel, Happ and Smith, 1966). There is nothing more functional than providing the mentally handicapped with tools to avoid sexual exploitation.

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